

The "Holy" God

From immanence to idolatry.

"I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory." Isaiah 6:1-3, KJV

In the Old City of Jerusalem, I stood reverently before the massive stones that comprise the base and foundation of the mount upon which the Jewish temple once stood. Standing before the Western, or Wailing, Wall, I noticed little slips of paper tucked in the crevices between the giant-hand-hewn stones. Wondering what the papers were, I reached in with my fingers and pulled one out. The handwriting on the paper began "G-d." I later found out that devout Jews hold the name of God, or the Lord, so sacred that they, out of respect for Him, refuse to spell His name in a profane (i.e., common) way. Omitting the letter "o," they write "G-d" or "L-rd." I fear that, within the pale of contemporary Christianity such respect, or reverence, for God has been, or is being, lost. God has become "cuddly" common to us. In this spirit, we turn to address the subject of God's nearness.

God's "immanence" is opposite from His "transcendence." Both of these categories of thought about God attempt to describe His relationship to His world; to nature, to nations, to people, to the animal kingdom, and so on. Theologians employ the terms to describe both God's involvement with and distance from His created universe. The Bible pictures God as being both near and far from His creation. Not only is God with us, He is also above us. As the transcendent One, He is distant. As the immanent One, He is near.

While God is not spatial but Spirit (John 4:24), He is described as being both above and below. In our thinking about God, we should allow these opposites to remain in tension with one another. To view God as transcendentally distant leads to Deism (i.e., God created, but is not actively involved in, the world.). To view God as immanently near leads to pantheism (i.e., God and creation are one and the same thing.). As one young blogger expresses it, "We need, somehow, to have God in our world without our world containing God. We need, somehow, God outside our world without eliminating him from it. . . . If God is in our world then he's less than God, if outside it, He's irrelevant." [1]

Let me say I am uncomfortable with describing God as immanent. Such thinking about God--His transcendence and His immanence--is born out of philosophical, or speculative, theology. Erickson acknowledges that, "The doctrine of divine immanence was not prominent in much of the history of Christian thought." [2] To me, the word "providence" better describes God's relationship to His creation. Immanence denotes a state. Providence denotes activity. After having acknowledged biblical passages demonstrating God's operation in the world (Genesis 34:14-15; Acts 17:27-28; Psalm 135:7; Matthew 5:45; 10:29-30; Colossians 1:16-17; etc.),

Erickson admits, "It is significant to note that the texts that we cited as evidence of God's immanence primarily refer to his action, his activity." [3] In other words, that God is providently active better describes His relationship to His creation than His being immanently present. For some of you, this might appear to be quibbling over words. But given the state our religious culture currently finds itself in, I think, if you will stay with me, you will see that it is not.

Pantheistic New Age religion fondly speaks of God as vibrating immanence, as energy, or as the Force. This god moves in atoms, plants, people, and more. This brand of spirituality has, over the past fifty years, been exerting influence upon American culture, and is spilling over into the evangelical church. God as immanent seems to be eclipsing God as transcendent. [4] In their interpretation of one text of Scripture, some Bible versions or paraphrases have been influenced in the direction of pantheistic immanence.

The New Century Version states, "There is one God and Father of everything. **He** rules everything and is everywhere and **is in everything**" (Emphasis mine, Ephesians 4:6, NCV). [5] When looking at the last clause (God . . . is in everything.), and taking it at face value, do you not think, dear reader, that it clearly states that God is "in" everything? If so, then the version communicates pantheism, and pantheism directly contradicts the biblical teaching that the holy God is separate from His creation.

God's dominant attribute in the Old Testament is His holiness, or apartness from His creation. [6] The Psalmist wrote, "**The Lord is great in Zion; and he is high above all the people. Let them praise thy great and terrible name; for it is holy. . . . Exalt ye the Lord our God, and worship at his footstool; for he is holy. . . . Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at his holy hill; for the Lord our God is holy**" (Psalm 99:3, 5, 9; Compare Isaiah 6:3; 55:8-9; Revelation 4:8; etc.). But what exactly is God's holiness, this essential attribute of His being?

The Old Testament word for "**holy**" (Hebrew, *qds*) likely derives from a root meaning to "to cut or separate." As regards God being holy, one fine Old Testament scholar observed that,

The basic idea conveyed by the holiness of God is His separateness . . . the One who stands apart from and above the creation. . . . It is no exaggeration to state that this element overshadows all others in the character of the deity . . . [7]

If He is not separated from His creation, then we can know God is not holy. Based upon holiness' essential meaning, how can it be thought that, as the NCV reads, "God . . . is in everything"? If God is "in" everything then He is not holy. And such a New Age concept of God becomes the spawning bed for idolatry (See Isaiah 40:18-25.).

For reason of its pantheistic implications, immanency, if unrestrained, leads to idolatry, for pantheism (i.e., nature worship) is idolatry. It's worshipping the creation rather than the Creator

(See Romans 1:21-23.). But Hannah exalted God in the following way: "**There is no one holy like the Lord, / Indeed, there is no one besides Thee, / Nor is there any rock like our God**" (2 Samuel 2:20). In light of the fact that the Bible presents God as "Holy Other," the trend of pastors to cite contemporary Bible versions that present God to be "in" nature, or to make statements that cozy up to New Age beliefs, is concerning.

For example, in his book *The Purpose Driven Life*, Pastor Rick Warren quotes the NCV of Ephesians chapter four and verse six. He prefaces his quotation with the statement that, "God is with you all the time. No place is any closer to God than the place where you are right now." [8] His citation of the verse and his comments show insensitivity to the encroachment of New Age religion upon American culture. New Age religion, it appears, is "spilling over" into evangelicalism. Again, the culture appears to be driving the church.

A Rick Warren defender argues that he did not say everything is divine. True. Warren did not say it, but the Bible version he quotes says it. About God, the NCV plainly states, *He . . . is in everything*. But Warren, says Richard Abanes, meant to teach God's immanence which he associates with God's omnipresence. He writes, "The thrust of the passage is God's presence not only above and beyond the universe, but also throughout it (His omnipresence)." [9] Abanes' defense of Warren on this point is confusing. The last two clauses of the NCV read that God "is everywhere and **is in everything**" (Emphasis mine, Ephesians 4:6). In that, according to Abanes, the first clause teaches God's omnipresence/immanence, how then should we understand the second clause? Does it possess the same theological implication as the preceding clause? I don't think so. If the referent of omnipresence/immanence is the first clause, "God . . . is everywhere," then how can the second clause, "God . . . is in everything," again be interpreted to mean "God is everywhere"? Such an interpretation makes the clauses redundant. Given that the first clause supposedly teaches omnipresence/immanence, the only "natural" meaning for the second clause is pantheistic.

Similarly, "self-esteem" preacher Robert H. Schuller believes that God is immanent in humanity. And if that is the case, Erickson notes God must necessarily be "immanent within all persons in the same sense." [10] So Schuller boldly announced, "Yes, God is alive and He is in every single human being!" [11] To him, God is within all people, and this he advocates despite the fact that Scripture teaches the contrary (See Romans 8:9 and John 8:44.). Apparently, this is where his "self-esteem gospel" has led Schuller. There remains only one "baby step" for him and his followers to take--the step from self-esteem to self-worship.

Ideas have consequences, and never more so than with those ideas men have about God. Believing in God's immanence carries certain implications. [12] First, immanentism makes special revelation from God unnecessary. Revelation is reduced to "conscious insight." As such, all literature possesses a certain inspiration. Immanentism also makes Jesus' incarnation unnecessary. Every human birth is a "miracle." The difference between humanity and Christ becomes only one of degree, not kind. All possess a Christ spirit and the potential to develop it. Immanentism also makes atonement unnecessary. For reason of His immanence, no real separation between God and humanity exists. Sin is no barrier. Separation from God is but an imagined problem that developing the new consciousness will solve. Salvation comes from within and below. As a result, the Gospel morphs into a social gospel.

Additionally, immanentism blurs the distinction between moral right and wrong. After citing how German Christians first embraced Kaiser Wilhelm and then Adolf Hitler on the assumption that whatever happened in history was God's will, Millard Erickson observes:

This is one of the dangers of overstating God's immanence. If God is totally immanent within the creation and history, there is no outside objective standard for making ethical evaluations.[13]

Finally, immanentism makes prayer unnecessary--as below, so above. Immanentism caused theologian Paul Tillich to admit toward the end of his life that he no longer prayed. He only meditated.

The only God worthy of our worship is One who is both providential and "Holy Other." That's why in the divine presence of heaven the four creatures continually praise, **"Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come"** (Revelation 4:8, KJV).

FOOTNOTES

[1] Daniel Silliman, "The Wholly Other and the Possibility of a Theological Language" (<http://sillimandoc.blogspot.com/2005/09/wholly-other-and-possibility-of.html>).

[2] Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 1998): 263.

[3] Ibid. 271.

[4] Over the last two centuries, Erickson notes that the understanding of God has trended toward immanency. See Erickson, *God the Father*, 260-261. He accounts for this for six reasons: 1. Contact and interaction between the world's cultures encourages religious pluralism; 2. Psychologizing life (i.e., the self-esteem movement) eliminates sin as a barrier between God and man; 3. The theory of relativity has revolutionized the scientific perception of the cosmos (i.e., no longer "above-below" and "up-down" categories of thought); 4. Mystical-pantheistic-New-Age religion eliminates belief in God's transcendence (i.e., God is one of us); 5. Casual relationships have replaced formal ones (i.e., we know our presidents as "Bill" or "George"); and, 6. The entertainment industry consistently profanes God by making Him out to be a man. All these factors contribute to moderns viewing God to be more immanent than transcendent. Obviously, such a view of God is unscriptural.

[5] One can also compare *Today's English Version* which reads: "[T]here is one God and Father of all mankind, who is Lord of all [mankind?], works through all [mankind?], and is in all [mankind?]" (Bracket questions are mine, Ephesians 4:6). See too *The Message*: "You have one Master, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who rules over all, works through all, and *is present in all*" (Emphasis mine, Ephesians 4:6).

[6] To God, His holiness is both essential and ethical (1 Peter 1:14-16). The ethical component of God's holiness is not the concern of this writing. However, it should be noted that profane beliefs about God induce profane behavior before God. Immorality issues from idolatry, and

idolatry results when people do not appreciate God's holiness (See Leviticus 19:1-4.).

[7] E.F. Harrison, "Holiness; Holy," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, General Editor, Volume 2 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982) 725. As another scholar summarizes, "God's holiness thus becomes an expression for his perfection of being that transcends everything creaturely." See Jackie A. Naude, "qds (# 7727)," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Volume 3, Willem A. VanGemeren, General Editor (Grand Rapids: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1997) 879.

[8] Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) 88.

[9] See Richard Abanes, *Rick Warren and the Purpose that Drives Him* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2005) 95. My exegesis of Ephesians 4:6 understands the verse as follows: In this majestic statement, Paul affirms God's presence in and lordship over the church. Though God is present in the farthest and darkest recesses of the universe (Psalm 139:7), Paul was not stating that in this context. He is teaching that while God is universally present throughout the cosmos, He is particularly present in and throughout the believing and regenerate church universal.

[10] Robert H. Schuller, "Hour of Power," Program #1762, p. 5, cited by Warren Smith, *Deceived On Purpose: The New Age Implications of the Purpose-Driven Church*, Second Edition (Magalia, California: Mountain Stream Press, 2004): 80-81. For a positive review of Smith's book, see CHALLIES.COM, 1/14/05 (<http://www.challies.com/>).

[11] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 1998): 333.

[12] I am indebted to Erickson's *Christian Theology* (pages 329-338) for his ideas as to the consequences of immanentism.

[13] Ibid. 336.